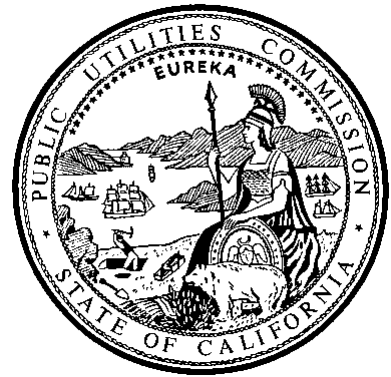


# **Consumer Guide to the California Public Utilities Commission**



**The California Public Utilities Commission (PUC) is the key source for help and information for customers of investor-owned utilities and some transportation companies in our state. If you use utilities in your home or business, a shuttle service to get to and from the airport, a moving company to move your personal goods into a home, or wonder about the safety of railroads in your community, the PUC is here for you.**

## About the PUC

California has a long tradition of forging innovation in regulation to protect its residents and businesses. In 1853, before a mile of railroad track had been laid in the state, a law was passed making it illegal to charge more than 20 cents a mile for transporting passengers. In 1873, the Legislature created the State Board of Transportation Commissioners, giving it jurisdiction over railroads.



In 1911, voters passed a constitutional amendment setting up the Railroad Commission, making the PUC one of the few utility regulatory commissions that is created by its State Constitution rather than by legislative statute.

The Public Utilities Act in 1912 broadened the Railroad Commission's duties and powers to include utilities. In 1946, the name was changed to the California Public Utilities Commission (PUC). Its purpose continues today: to regulate privately owned utilities and some transportation companies in the state and oversee safety of utility facilities and rail systems.

This booklet provides a brief description of the Commission, and the consumer services it provides.

## The Commission Is Many People

The Commission consists of five Commissioners appointed by the Governor, and approved by the State Senate, for terms of six years. Commissioners' terms are staggered to assure that experienced members are always present on the panel. The Commission president chairs the decision-making meetings and other formal sessions, assigns cases among the members, and directs staff. The five Commissioners as a whole make all final decisions on policies and procedures.

The staff of more than 900 people includes administrative law judges, engineers, attorneys, support personnel, analysts, economists, accountants, rail and safety experts, consumer representatives, and investigators.

By law, the Commission headquarters is in San Francisco. It also has offices in Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Diego. Formal documents can be filed at the PUC offices in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

# What the PUC Does

The Commission regulates the rates and services of about 3,300 transportation companies and 1,264 telecommunications, energy, and water utilities. The investor-owned utilities regulated by the Commission include natural gas, electric, water, steam, sewer, pipeline, and telephone companies. Transportation utilities regulated by the PUC include railroads, buses, limousines, airport shuttles, household goods moving companies, and marine vessels.

The Commission also oversees safety standards and procedures for power and communications lines, gas and water facilities, railroad systems, and propane service in mobile home parks. Its inspectors and engineers conduct on-site inspections as part of their regular duties.

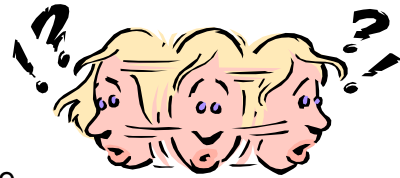
In some cases, state law requires the PUC to prepare an environmental impact report before approving construction of certain facilities such as transmission lines or pipelines.

In reviewing a utility's request to increase rates, the Commission must balance the public interest in obtaining reliable and safe products and services with the utility's expectations of a fair profit on its investment. In carrying out this responsibility, the Commission encourages participation of all parties affected by its actions, including the customers of the utilities it regulates.

## PUC Services for the Consumer

### The Consumer Affairs Branch

**Here to work with you on Telecommunications, Energy, and Water Utilities Complaints**



Consumers have a right to expect safe and reliable utility service, and assistance with questions or disputes with the utilities.

Since competition began in the telecommunications industry, market conditions affect some telecommunications rates and some services. For example, cellular and DSL *rates* are not regulated by the PUC. The PUC does regulate essential services, such telephone service, which connects to the system through phone lines, and enforces protections against abusive practices.

If you have a complaint about your PUC-regulated phone, electric, natural gas, or water bill or service:

- First, call your utility at the number printed on your bill and discuss the problem with its representatives.

- If talking to your utility does not resolve the problem, you may ask the PUC's Consumer Affairs staff to investigate the issue.
  - If you file a complaint with the PUC, staff will need to know your name, a phone number where you can be reached during the day, address, address of the service if different, phone number or account number the service is billed under, name of the utility, and a description of the problem.
- If our Consumer Affairs staff does not resolve the problem, you may file a formal complaint with the PUC.

#### To reach Consumer Affairs:

- **Phone: 800-649-7570     TTY: 415-703-2032**
- **E-mail: [consumer-affairs@cpuc.ca.gov](mailto:consumer-affairs@cpuc.ca.gov)**
- **Write or Visit:** PUC Consumer Affairs  
505 Van Ness Avenue  
San Francisco, CA 94102
- **Or visit the Los Angeles Office:** 320 W. 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 500, Los Angeles

## Outreach

The PUC Outreach Officers interact with communities and their elected officials providing information on current Commission proceedings and consumer education. The Outreach Officers are also available to speak at community meetings. To reach them, call or write:

- **Donna Silvestre     213-576-7058**  
320 West 4th Street, Suite 500, Los Angeles, CA 90013
- **John Morgan     619-525-4309**  
1350 Front Street, Room 4000, San Diego, CA 92101

## Public Advisor's Office

The Public Advisor's Office coordinates and assists at the PUC hearings that are held throughout the state for consumers' input on important issues. It assists individuals in filing formal complaints with the PUC and encourages and assists interested groups and individuals to participate in Commission proceedings. The office also advises the Commissioners and staff about ways to facilitate public participation where barriers may exist.



**Special accommodations** at hearings, such as language interpreters, can be arranged by the Public Advisor's Office. Call (415) 703-2074 or TTY (415) 703-5282 or toll free 1-866-836-7825 for these arrangements.

A booklet, "PUC Guide for Public Participation," which explains how consumers can participate effectively in the PUC's formal proceedings, sample filings, and a bibliography of intervenor compensation, is available from the Public Advisor offices:

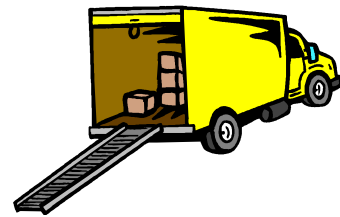
**San Francisco Office**      **415-703-2074 or (toll free) 866-849-8390**  
[public.advisor@cpuc.ca.gov](mailto:public.advisor@cpuc.ca.gov)

**Los Angeles Office**      **213-576-7055 or (toll free) 866-849-8391**  
[public.advisor.la@cpuc.ca.gov](mailto:public.advisor.la@cpuc.ca.gov)

**TTY for both offices:**      **415-703-5282 (or toll free) 866-836-7825**

## Household Goods Movers

The Commission regulates household goods movers that move personal goods from and to points within California.



- Before you contract with a mover, call the PUC to be certain the company is in good standing.
- Get and read the booklet, "Important Information for Persons Moving Household Goods," from the mover.
- Be sure you get an estimate in writing.
- If you have a problem with the move that you cannot resolve with the company, call the PUC:

**800-877-8867 – to verify standing**

**800-FON 4 PUC – to file a complaint against a mover**

## Limousines/Shuttles

The Commission regulates the services of for-hire limousine companies and shuttle companies such as those you hire to get to and from the airport or to go to a special event.

- Before you contract with a limousine or shuttle, call the PUC to be certain the company is in good standing.
- If you have a problem with the company that you cannot resolve with it, call the PUC.

**800-877-8867 – to verify that the company is in good standing**

**800-894-9444 – to file a complaint**

## Rail Safety

The Commission staff inspects rail and rail transit operations, tracks and crossings. If you have safety related questions, call the office nearest you. Rail transit includes trains or trolleys powered by a cable, a third rail, or overhead electrical lines, such as the Blue Line in Los Angeles and BART in San Francisco.



	Railroad	Rail Transit	Rail Crossings
San Francisco	415-703-1306	415-703-2723	415-703-1559
Sacramento	916-327-3239	916-327-1416	916-324-7143
Los Angeles	213-576-7069	213-576-7086	213-576-7081

## Utility Safety

If you see wires down or smell gas, call 911 and your local utility immediately. You can also call the PUC about safety of electric or telecommunications lines, natural gas pipelines, or propane gas service in mobile home parks at:

**800-755-1447**

## How the Commission Grants Authority

### Certificates of Public Convenience and Necessity

Before a public utility or a transportation company begins operations or makes significant additions to its plant, it is generally required to obtain a Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity (CPCN). This procedure helps ensure that the company, or plant addition serves the public's welfare, is financially sound, and would not interfere with a nearby or competing public utility's operation.

### Transfer of Property or Stock

A public utility must receive PUC approval before it issues stock, bonds, or other securities; sells, transfers, leases, or encumbers utility property; seeks to merge with another utility company, or assumes a liability when acquiring control of a public utility.

Any party seeking to obtain control of a utility through purchase of its stock must first obtain authorization from the Commission.

# How the Commission Resolves Issues and Complaints

The utility industries are continually changing, and as new technologies come into play, new and improved services are offered. These changes often affect broad sectors of the population as well as business and industry. Social and economic issues arise that only the Commission has the authority to address. Generally, the Commission uses four types of formal proceedings to review issues:

- **Applications** – when a utility or transportation company requests something such as a rate increase, it submits an Application.
- **Formal Complaints** – when a consumer advocacy group alleges that a utility company has done something and wants the Commission to correct the problem, the group would file a Formal Complaint. A consumer, unable to resolve a utility dispute through the Commission's Consumer Affairs Branch, may also file a Formal Complaint.
- **Order Instituting Investigation (OII)** - the Commission uses this proceeding when it initiates an investigation. For example, it is used when the Commission investigates a moving company's practices.
- **Order Instituting Rulemaking (OIR)** - this proceeding is used to create or revise rules or guidelines that affect a utility or a broad sector of an industry. For example, the Commission is using this proceeding to look at ways to improve energy efficiency.

## The Process

All formal proceedings may involve hearings but sometimes an issue can be decided based on documents the parties submit, negating the need for a hearing. The PUC requires utilities or transportation companies to notify their customers when the requests may interest or impact them. The PUC will also schedule meetings in the community affected to allow for public comment. Utility and PUC staff usually attend to explain the case, but the focus is on input from the community.



In all formal proceedings, at least one Commissioner and an Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) are assigned to guide the case through the PUC process. Generally, an ALJ conducts the hearings, meets with the assigned Commissioner to discuss developments and issues, and, in consultation with the assigned Commissioner, prepares a proposed decision. The Commissioners may prepare alternate proposals, and the full five-member Commission will decide which one to authorize during their business meeting.

The Commission's business meetings are held usually twice a month and are open to the public. There is also a period for public comment at the beginning of each meeting. If a majority of the Commission votes for a proposed decision, it becomes law. In certain complaint cases, the decision of the presiding officer may become final without a vote of the Commission, if no party or Commissioner requests review of the decision within 30 days after it is issued.

Any decision or order of the Commission is subject to both administrative and judicial review upon a party's written request for a rehearing based on legal error. If the Commission denies rehearing, the requesting party may appeal to the California Supreme Court. Certain decisions in complaint cases may be appealed to the Court of Appeals.

The Commission can also modify a decision in response to a petition to modify (a pleading citing "changed circumstances" rather than legal error).

## Publications

Various publications that describe and explain the activities and programs of the PUC are available without charge on the PUC website and by contacting the PUC Communications Office at 415-703-2669.

## The PUC Website

The PUC website, **[www.cpuc.ca.gov](http://www.cpuc.ca.gov)**, contains a wide range of resources: a Consumer Help Desk, the Commission's Daily Calendar, Business Meeting agendas, division activities, legal documents, a News Room, and links to numerous other websites.

